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AUTHOR Parker, Sandra
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ABSTRACT

There are many differences between the cultural stereotypes of students and the actual student in the classroom. The key to teaching these students is to always assess the audience and then prepare for the epistemological problems that are apt to be encountered. Successful women's or gender studies teachers emphasize open-mindedness, tolerance, flexibility, patience, and realism. Women's or gender studies courses are relevant to students' lives. The material is extremely interesting, and the scholarship is vital and stimulating. However, feminist materials are often controversial and deal with affective, as well as cognitive issues, and student anger may become an issue. Preparation of materials and thoughtful implementation of pedagogical techniques are essential, including interactive and "non-traditional" approaches in a non-authoritarian classroom environment. Adolescent students may deny a teacher's critique of society or become zealous about the course. By contrast, adult learners often aggressively endorse non-traditional ideas and are eager to add to classroom teaching materials. Adolescent students must be actively involved in the learning process. Teachers must realize that the course may not influence some students until later in life. Adult students often enter such courses with a less threatened attitude. They can share experiences and feelings on subject matter. Adult learners enjoy written assignments that draw upon personal experience. They thrive on creative tasks which are not encouraged in their worklives. Regardless of student age, teachers must encourage classroom experiences that exemplify how people may know themselves through the processes of self-evaluation. (GEA)

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DICK AND JANE REVISITED: WOMEN'S STUDIES AND THE ADULT LEARNER

By Sandra Parker

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"Dick and Jane Revisited: Women's Studies and the Adult Learner"

There are many difference between the cultural stereotypes about our students and the actual student we face in the classroom. Novelist Toni Morrison instructs us in The Bluest Eye about the rarity of the so-called American norm: white, middle-class, heterosexual, economically secure, stable, passive, and innocent. Surely we know today that this student is a theoretical construct. The real Dick and Jane of the women's studies or gender studies classroom is more apt to be working class, tawny skinned, mobile, threatened by economics and the world's pressure, and fully experienced in the inequalities of America's gender stereotypes; all of these are realities that the feminist classroom teacher should acknowledge.

To teach America's real Dick and Jane the key is always: assess your audience. Then try to prepare for the epistemological problems that are apt to be encountered. This means that the teacher must be well aware of her or his own strengths and weaknesses and be prepared to use them as teaching resources. The other part of the teacher's job is to respect theforthcoming contributions of the new students. The successful women's or gender studies teacher will emphasize open mindedness, tolerance, flexibility, patience, and realism. This teacher must accept the ocurrence of anger and joy in the feminist classroom where epiphanies can have a central place.

When teaching either women's studies or gender studies

students, there are certain pedagogical advantages that come into play. For one thing, the coursework is powerfully relevant to the students' lives; for another, it is extremely interesting material, and, thirdly, the available scholarship is vital and stimulating. On the otherhand, there are potential drawbacks to successfully teaching these courses. Feminist materials are often controversial; they deal with affective, as well as cognitive issues, and students' anger may become an issue in the classroom when criticism of the status quo and change are implied.

There are, of course, preparatory strategies available to teachers. Preparation of materials and thoughtful implementation of pedagogical techniques are essential, including interactive and "nontraditional" approaches in a nonauthoritarian classroom environment. Teachers need to be able to modulate their classroom style, therefore, and especially to anticipate and practice methods for deflecting anger. For preparation, teachers can anticipate the sorts of student who will be engaged, and plan the classroom scenario with realistic expectations.

Overall, one can generalize about the adolescent Dick and Jane in the classroom--they are characterized by curiosity, innocence (of an intellectual sort) and inexperience (of a worldly sort). Their concerns relate to personal development and relationships. At the same time, they are dubious about nontraditional materials and critiques of the world they "know." Often adolescent students may deny the women's or gender studies teacher's critique of society or adopt, at best, a "wait and see" attitude. They may reject the feminist teacher as a "kook" whose

idiosyncratic minority viewpoint is irrelevant and can be dismissed. On the other hand, when such students become zealous about the course, they may put the teacher upon a pedestal.

The dynamic alters in many aspects when the students are mid-life adults. These by definition are often experienced, interested and motivated to learn. The teacher here will find in each student a personal quarry of experiences from career and personal life, which can serve as an asset or a burden in the course. These "grown up" students are often concerned with understanding and labeling their experiences; they wish to see their problems within a broader, generic framework that is new; they often feel great relief and joy at venting their personal exploits or victimization with interactive cohorts who are "in the same place," as well as the group leader. These adult learners often aggressively endorse non-traditional ideas and are even eager to add to classroom teaching materials. They may recognize an immediacy in the feminist curriculum that claims an affective relevance which promises change in their lives. Furthermore, their relationship to the professor may be unique--here is an adult cohort who is apt to be measured and tested by their own standards.

With these contrasts in mind, what pedagogical consequences for teachers of women's or gender students come to mind? First of all, the adolescent student has special needs; he or she ought to be actively involved in the learning process. "Hands on" inquiry assignments bring the "real world" into the adolescent students' view. Examples might be assignments about analyzing

the media's gender stereotypes, book reviews about contemporary fiction or sexually-oriented magazines, and, better yet, an interview assignment where students formulate questions on a chosen topic and give interviews to men and women of different ages.

Also the women's studies or gender studies teacher needs to be strongly prepared with academic scholarship that is irrefutable. The feminist textbooks will be seen as revisionary, and this "new" feminist and gender scholarship must stand up as a counterbalance that can challenge adolescent students' perceptions and work in other more traditional courses; its viewpoints should not be undermined by perceptions of unfairness, subjectivity and prejudice.

The feminist teacher must also prepare exercises and materials with realistic expectations. For instance, the adolescent learner will be uncomfortable with discussions about her or his sexuality. And sometimes feminist courses plant seeds which are harvested much later, so the adolescent may experience a delayed acknowledgment of the course's materials and viewpoint. Teachers must, therefore, anticipate an uneven reception, especially from immature males or others, for instance from deeply, right-wing religious students who are enmeshed in preconceived definitions that they do not dare to examine.

An interesting contrast appears when considering the mid-life Dick and Jane who will often enter the women's studies or gender studies classroom with a less threatened attitude. They may casually accept the feminist scholarship that is assigned. These

adults especially are rewarded by a focus upon the feminist framework of definitions and concepts which can give them a conceptual foundation. These help students to deal with their own deeply felt concerns. Such adult learners often rejoice in sharing their experiences and feelings; they talk at length and often must be held back and restrained by the teacher so that genuine sharing may take place for more shy members of the class.

Adults also respond warmly to faculty honesty and humor. The teacher must exhibit and promote respect for the adult students' perceptions. A smart group leader also tries to avoid criticism and interruptions, encouraging the group members to be mutually nonjudgmental and supportive. Often teachers can aid students by listening, sharing the excitement, and then relabeling the meaning of what has been said. This may have the effect of clarrifying a "click" or breakthrough. Teachers will also find that adult learners enjoy written assignments that draw upon their personal experiences and allow the shaping of event into narrative, a channeling of anger in many cases. Adult learners also enthusiastically undertake conventional assignments that engage them in the world of scholarship; particularly helpful is their choice of subjective interest which is then researched. Adult learners, of course, also thrive on creative tasks which their worklives and adult constraints often don't encourage--tasks such as writing poetry, keeping journals, doing posters, or preparing a "box" that depicts who they really are. These are entered into with a zest that often delights the class, as well as the faculty leader.

At the simplest level, the feminist teacher is explaining a personal philosophy, using first names, introducing people, talking and listening, being process oriented, cultivating student power, debates, confrontations, and problem solving. But feminist pedagogy may be seen in a more profound light; it builds upon a deficit model of education and offers students a compensation model. The feminist Dick and Jane must face the challenges which are implicit in criticizing their society and, simultaneously, defining a personal epistemology. Both deconstruction and construction must take place for the student.

Both adolescents and mid-life adults need affirmation; the feminist classroom offers the potential of being the place where the inner voice can be validated. Regardless of the age of Dick or Jane, the teacher's job is to encourage classroom experiences that exemplify how people may know themselves by gazing into the mirror; as Morrison's fictive white children from the children's reader are critiqued, so are we all.

Dr. Sandra Parker
Hiram College